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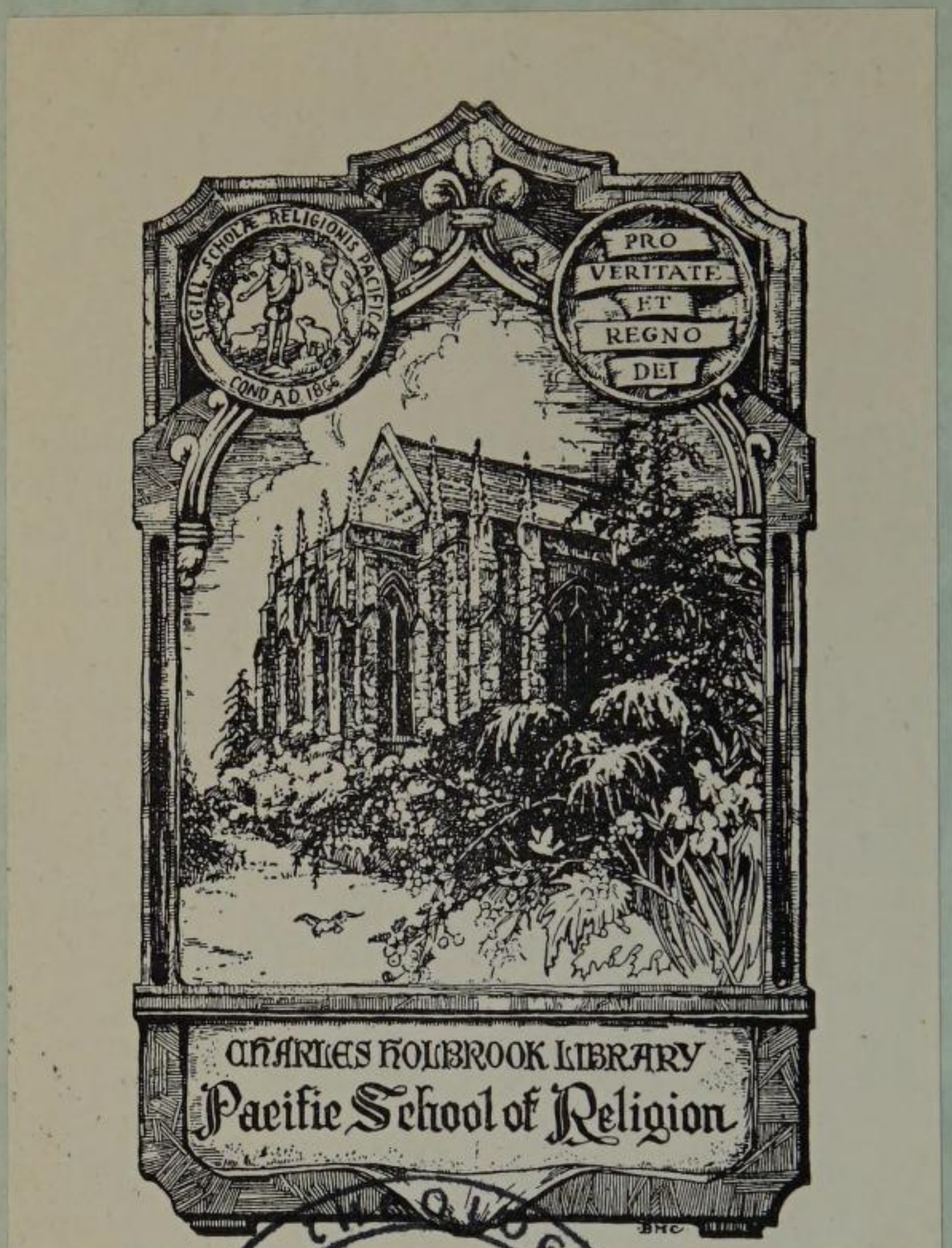

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"SWEDENBORG AND CONTEMPORARY BIBLE INTERPRETATION"

By DR. W. M. HORTON

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Swedenborg and Contemporary Bible Interpetation*

Walter Marshall Horton

IN a previous study of *The Significance of Swedenborg for Contemporary Theology* (1938), I have confessed that for me the most baffling and difficult aspect of Swedenborg's work is that part of it on which he himself laid the greatest stress, his work as an interpreter of the Bible. This contrast between his own perspective upon his own work and that of a modern inquirer is by no means strange or unusual. Great men seldom foresee wherein their greatness for posterity will chiefly consist. Columbus supposed himself to be finding a new, short passage to India when he was actually discovering a new world. Kepler's three laws of planetary motion (the surviving residue of an immense but shaky system of cosmic harmonies) had no such outstanding importance in their author's mind as they have assumed in modern astronomy. Yet no historical character is seen in his true magnitude unless he is first seen in his own setting, through his own eyes and those of his contemporaries, and only afterward related to the problems and interests of a later time. That is what I have tried to do, a little at a time, over a period of some thirty-five years, with the fascinating figure of Emanuel Swedenborg. Perhaps it is now time to return to the task of comprehension once more, and see if I can unravel the snarl that baffled me most last time!

It may interest you to know in what order I have proceeded in my previous exploratory adventures with Swedenborg. He interested me first as a *mystic*. In a seminar on mysticism under Professor Eugene Lyman about 1928 I made a study of two great mystics, Pascal and Swedenborg, both of whom were also great scientists, and both of

*Address to the Massachusetts Association of the New Jerusalem, April 17, 1955.

whom kept their scientific integrity while passing beyond science in quest of a more direct, immediate knowledge of God. From that study I retain a strong conviction that science and mysticism are both valid forms of knowledge, which need to be correlated with one another, but that mysticism plumbs the depths of reality as science by itself cannot do.

A little later, under the influence of Gardner Murphy, I became interested in Swedenborg as a *psychic*. His clairvoyant vision of the Stockholm fire, his automatic writing, his various and multitudinous spirit controls, all fell into patterns made familiar by the investigations of the Society for Psychical Research and both confirmed and were confirmed by other well-attested phenomena of the same sort. What such phenomena prove remains somewhat problematic to me, since the psychic's own unconscious mind, and other human minds as well, probably help to shape the form and content of these phenomena; but they at least point to the reality of a spiritual world that surrounds and pentrates every individual as the air he breathes surrounds and penetrates his lungs.

It was in 1933, when I gave the Ayer Lectures at Colgate-Rochester on *Theism and the Scientific Spirit,* that my eyes were opened to the significance of Swedenborg as a *philosopher* and *theologian*. Searching for a pair of representative eighteenth-century thinkers who would sum up the problem of science and theology in that era and point to some significant alternative solutions of it, I hit upon Swedenborg and Thomas Paine as a most revealing pair. Paine made a theology out of Newtonian astronomy, with the result that his deistic God became remote and inaccessible; Voltaire spoke for all the deists when he said of his own relationship to God, "We bow but we do not speak"; but Swedenborg's theory of correspondences and discrete degrees made God universally accessible through the spiritual world that lies beneath the surface of every natural phenomenon. My conclusion was that Swedenborg "gave science its rights" within the natural sphere, "while bringing the soul into immediate touch with God and the spiritual world, in a way that seemed impossible in the mechanical world of Newton and Thomas Paine"; or again, that Swedenborg's thought "relates the God of religion to the world of nature as Pascal did not . . . makes room in his universe for love and care in God, and freedom in man, as Spinoza did not"—a conclusion which lifts him high among the religious thinkers of the modern era.

This conclusion of mine, together with some negative remarks about

the authenticity of Swedenborg's visions and Bible interpretations, brought me into personal touch with many New Churchmen — some of them students in my classes — who have done much to correct and deepen my understanding of the founder of their faith ever since. On at least two previous occasions I have been invited to speak under New Church auspices, and have learned much from both these experiences. The most recent of these occasions, a sermon at the Church of the Neighbor in Brooklyn, published in 1946 *(Swedenborg's Vision of a United Christianity),* opened up a brand-new aspect of Swedenborg's significance to me: his work as a *pioneer of the ecumenical movement.* The New Church he predicted was not just a particular sect, I began to see, but a movement of renewal in the Church at large, which would make all particular churches shine with a new light, like "gems in a King's crown"; and the present ecumenical movement, despite all its shortcomings, seemed to me a partial fulfilment of this prediction.

When one has come to so high an opinion of a man as mystic and psychic, as philosopher and theologian, and as ecumenical pioneer, it may seem like gilding the lily to try to appreciate him in some other capacity. After all, we do not insist on admiring so great a Christian thinker as St. Augustine in his capacity as interpreter of Scripture just because we admire him as a mystic and as a theologian. St. Augustine was as inferior to his great contemporary St. Jerome in Bible interpretation as he was superior to him in theology. Yet I hesitate to leave my judgment of Swedenborg's Bible interpretation quite as it was in my 1938 summary of his significance for contemporary theology: that is to say, *last and least* among all the aspects of his work! I hesitate, because I know how important this side of his work seemed to him and his followers, and because I have not yet tried to view it in historical perspective as I did his philosophy. So let me try to interpret the significance of his Biblical method, keeping constantly in mind the difference between the problem of Bible interpretation in the eighteenth and in the twentieth centuries.

The main current of eighteenth-century thought was as static and external in its view of the Bible as in its view of Nature. What we call the "historical sense" hardly existed; it was the nineteenth century that discovered history as an unfolding process conditioned at every stage by special contingent factors peculiar to the period. For the prehistorical century we call the "Age of Reason," Nature was a smoothly running, eternally self-repeating chronometer, revealing in its orderly

laws the moral and the rational character of its transcendent Maker; the Bible, similarly, was a coherent body of moral and religious teaching, whose supernatural character was certified by the amazing miracles and minutely fulfilled prophecies it contained, but whose revelations had to be both internally self-consistent and externally harmonious with natural theology to be worthy of credence. The radical thinkers of the period, the deists, affirmed that the Book of Nature told man clearly all he needed for his moral and religious guidance — that God exists, that a virtuous life is God's will for man, and that man will be rewarded or punished in a future life for his good or evil deeds — whereas the Bible is full of self-contradictions, and some of its teachings are shockingly opposed to the self-evident truths of natural theology. Convinced of this, men like Thomas Paine went through the Bible pointing out the "mistakes of Moses" with indignant fury, "as a man would go through a wood with an ax on his shoulder, and fell trees"; and the best that rational apologists could say in rebuttal of such charges was typified by Bishop Butler's argument that Nature, after all, was just about as full of inconsistencies as the Bible. So long as Nature and the Bible were statically conceived and externally viewed, there was no escape from this impasse.

What Swedenborg did to break the deadlock was to re-interpret both Nature and the Bible, in a strictly analogous way, as the outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual meaning, or rather a *series* of spiritual meanings, rising higher and higher the deeper one got beneath the surface. As the surface of Nature could and should be interpreted by Newtonian mechanics, the surface of Scripture could and should be interpreted by sound Hebrew and Greek linguistics; but beneath the surface of every natural phenomenon and every Biblical phrase there were secret meanings, celestial *arcana,* hidden from the merely rational mind and visible only to mystical insight. As the natural world was everywhere expressive of a spiritual world that in turn expressed the very presence and power of God, so the literal meaning of Scripture at every point was pregnant with higher spiritual meaning and highest celestial meaning. The literal historical meaning, understood "internally," relates to mankind's progression through various "churches" or as they are traditionally called, "dispensations," toward the goal of the Kingdom of God; the higher spiritual meaning, to the individual's growth in the Christian life; the highest or celestial meaning, to the glorification of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the source and goal of the Kingdom in the world and

of the new life in the Christian. This "trio of themes," as Mr. Wunsch has shown *(The World Within the Bible),* constitutes the whole substance of Swedenborg's interpretation of the Bible.

How did Swedenborg arrive at this view? By a special revelation of the Lord, as he devoutly believed; yet all revelations have their preparation in the experience of the recipient, and make use of his normal intelligence. In Swedenborg's case, the most important preparatory factors would appear to be two: his long wrestle with Nature, in search of her inner meaning, and acquaintance with an ancient tradition of symbolic Bible interpretation, opposed to the bald literalism of the eighteenth-century mind. The Key to Nature and the Key to Scripture are really one and the same Key; I see this more clearly now than when I first studied Swedenborg, and so I cannot divorce my opinion of his natural philosophy from my opinion of his exegesis so completely as I then did. His scientific researches and mystical insights into the hidden meaning of Nature certainly helped him to grasp this common Key, but so did the influence of the Platonic, symbolic tradition in the interpretation of Scripture — or so it seems to me. Signe Toksvig (*Emanuel Swedenborg,* 1948) has given some evidence that Swedenborg was acquainted with the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, both in its ancient form (Dionysius the Areopagite) and in its modern form (the Protestant mystics and the Cambridge Platonists). This tradition has always united a spiritual view of Nature with a symbolic interpretation of Scripture. Origen, St. Augustine, and Dante were all Neo-platonists in a high degree, and all were symbolists in their interpretation of the Bible. It is important to distinguish Swedenborg's method, as Mr. Wunsch has done, from the capricious, irresponsible allegory often used by the Platonizing Fathers; yet at its best, as used for example by Dante, the allegorical method was not merely capricious, but involved a reasoned scheme of symbolism strikingly similar to Swedenborg's. Consider Dante's explanation of Ps. 114, "When Israel went out of Egypt," as given in his explanatory letter to Can Grande:

> If we look to the *letter* only, what is conveyed to us is the deliverance of the children of Israel out of Egypt in the time of Moses; if we look to the *allegory* of it, what is signified is our redemption accomplished through Christ; if we consider the *moral sense,* what is signified is the conversion of the soul from her present grief and wretchedness to a state of grace; and if we consider the *anagogical sense,* what is signified is the passing of the sanctified soul from the bondage of earthly corruption to the freedom of everlasting glory.

This scheme of symbolism, which was not peculiar to Dante but widely employed in medieval Bible interpretation, bears a resemblance to Swedenborg's "trio" too close to be accidental. Swedenborg's "inner historical" sense lies just beneath the surface of Dante's "literal" sense; his "higher" and "highest" senses are identical with Dante's "moral" and "allegorical" senses, while his whole conception of *Heaven and Hell* represents a close correlation between the "moral" and the "anagogical" senses. What Dante said of his own correlation of morals and eschatology, in the same letter from which we have quoted, could just as well have been said about *Heaven and Hell* by Swedenborg: that the "subject" of his whole vast panorama of the other world is "man, according as, by his deserts and demerits in the use of his free will, he is justly open to rewards and punishments."

I conclude, then, that one important influence conditioning Swedenborg's new revelation of the Bible's inner meaning was his acquaintance with the ancient tradition of symbolic Bible interpretation coming down from the Platonizing Fathers and codified in the medieval scheme of the four "senses," literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical. Of course, he was also familiar with the Protestant Reformers' rejection of this scheme (because of its association with irresponsible allegorizing and what they called the "traditions of men") and their attempt to regulate all their teaching by "Scripture alone." By the end of the seventeenth century, Protestant insistence upon the *ipsissima verba* of Scripture had led to a barren, literalistic scholasticism based upon proof-texts. Swedenborg's spiritual interpretation of the Bible is in conscious revolt against this Protestant scholasticism, both Lutheran and Calvinistic; but he by no means rejects all the work of Luther and Calvin themselves. Calvin's careful, scholarly exposition of the literal sense of Scripture could be accepted by Swedenborg as the natural basis on which to build a doctrinal and spiritual exposition of the Bible; for, as he says (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine,* No. 262), "the internal sense of the Word without the external, would be like a house without a foundation." Luther's identification of the Word of God in the Bible with Christ Himself and whatever concerns Christ *(was Christum treibet)* is strikingly similar to Swedenborg's assertion that "the Lord is the Word" (*ibid.,* No. 263). Both Luther and Swedenborg find the Word of God in the Old Testament because they find the Lord Jesus Christ typified there, even in Genesis and Exodus; but it is amazing and a bit amusing to discover how sharply they differ over the presence of the Word in

certain New Testament books. Luther finds the Gospel of Christ above all in the Epistles of Paul, where he first met with this Gospel in his hour of greatest spiritual distress; and by comparison with the clearness of this Pauline Gospel he regards the Epistle of James as a "right strawy epistle" and the Apocalypse as a most dubious part of the canon. Swedenborg, on the other hand, revolts so sharply against the Lutheran doctrine of salvation by faith alone that he finds no "internal sense" at all in the Pauline Epistles, and lists only the Four Gospels and the Apocalypse among the genuine "Books of the Word" in the New Testament (*ibid.*, No. 266). This judgment is as hard to maintain in the light of contemporary New Testament scholarship as the violent contrast between the religion of Jesus and the religion of Paul which was current among some radical critics a generation ago.[1]

Of course, it is unfair to judge Swedenborg in the light of contemporary Biblical criticism. He himself was a pioneer documentary critic when he called attention, for example, to the frequent citations in the Pentateuch from a lost *Book of the Wars of Jehovah* (*ibid.*, No. 255); but his main interest lay elsewhere. He was bound by his own principles to accept the literal sense, whatever sound scholarship might prove it to be, as the foundation of the spiritual sense; so if he could have foreseen the remarkable achievements of linguistic and historical science in the last two centuries, he might have altered his scheme of correspondences considerably, while still sticking to his fundamental principles. For example, if he had understood the parallelism of Hebrew poetry more adequately, he might not have insisted, as he often does, that pairs of words in the Old Testament regularly refer to two different levels of meaning, instead of reinforcing the same meaning.[2] If he had been able to see the prophetical books in their historical *Sitz im Leben,* he might have seen their spiritual sense and their celestial sense in closer connection with their literal sense, and would not have been driven to such strange conjectures by the apparent meaninglessness of the text as it stood. His scientific mind would have been so intrigued by the achievements of modern Biblical scholarship

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[1]We must not suppose that by finding no "internal sense" in the Pauline Epistles, Swedenborg means to deny that they express God's Word in any form or degree. He makes plain in many places that parts of Scripture which lack the internal sense may be very useful for "doctrine." Still, it is very striking, and hardly accidental, that his judgment and Luther's about the New Testament are so opposite.

[2]See for example Psalm 19:1, 7, 8, where "heavens" and "firmament," "law" and "testimony," "statutes" and "commandment" are meant to echo each other's *sense* as closely as the rhymes in a couplet of English poetry echo each other's *sound.* In all couplets of Hebrew poetry (Psalms, Proverbs, and much of the prophetical books) it would be wrong to suppose that such pairs of words in the first and second lines of a couplet refer to different levels of meaning.

that he might have lost some of his interest in the symbolic meanings of names and numbers.[3] Still, his primary interest would have remained the same — to press behind the literal, historical meaning to the divine Word which it conveys to the enlightened soul. This task remains as necessary today as it was in the eighteenth century. Let us examine the contemporary problem of Biblical interpretation, and see why this is so.

Two hundred years of historical criticism of the Bible have now created a new situation for Bible interpreters. Documentary criticism, begun in 1753 (during Swedenborg's life-time) by Jean Astruc, has resolved the Pentateuch into four independent sources, J, E, D and P, and the Synoptic Gospels into two principal sources, Mark and Q, and a number of subsidiary ones. Textual criticism has discovered errors and variations in our Bible manuscripts. Form-criticism has pushed back of the documentary sources of our Bible to the oral traditions that preceded all written documents. Comparative study of the religions and cultures in the midst of which our Bible was written has given us a much more vivid understanding of its literal historical meaning than was possible in the eighteenth century. Yet with all this new knowledge of the Bible's historical background, there has arisen a new danger of losing its enduring message. As our former New Testament teacher at Oberlin, the late Clarence Tucker Craig, once put the problem:

> How can anything absolute be found in the boundless agitated sea of past events? Since history knows only probabilities, not certainties, and finds nothing that is not related to the whole endless flow of events, how can a firm faith be founded thereon? (*Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1943, pp. 289-290.)

The problem of Bible interpretation today is almost the reverse of the problem Swedenborg faced in the eighteenth century. Then, Nature and the Bible were statically and mechanically conceived, as we have seen; now, both Nature and the Bible are caught in such a dynamic flux of ever-shifting relativities that it is hard to discover anything stable or absolute in them that could be called the Word of God! No one wishes to deny the scientific facts about Nature or the historical facts about the Bible; but these facts often seem so remote from the area of genuine religious concern that one has a strong temptation to brush them aside and seek for the real religious meaning

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[3]Of course, most Biblical names and many Biblical numbers *have* symbolic meanings. I only mean to suggest that Swedenborg sometimes pushes this true principle too far.

apart from these facts, not *in* and *through* them. A generation ago the Bible seemed so remote from modern life that some theologians rested their Christian faith on philosophical rather than on Biblical foundations. More recently, a neo-orthodox movement has arisen under the leadership of Karl Barth, which has rediscovered the Word of God in the Bible, but often with such disregard of the generally accepted principles of historical criticism that it seems, as Craig puts it, "in grave danger of becoming a retreat to dogma rather than an advance to a truer insight into the permanent significance of the events recorded in the Old and New Testaments." (*ibid.*, p. 294.) Is there any deliverance from this dilemma?

I am inclined to think that the deliverance is already coming through the rise of a new school of Biblical Theology, still historical and objective in its study of the original literal meaning of each Bible passage, but so concerned to interpret the total message of the Old and New Testaments, in their unity as well as their diversity, that it now furnishes Christian thought with much more nourishing food than it could get from any mere mass of historical information about the date, authorship, and probable occasion of the various Biblical books. If Swedenborg were alive today, I believe he would not be misled or dismayed by historical relativism, but take a great interest in Biblical Theology, for he would see emerging in this current movement some of the same great themes which he singled out intuitively in the eighteenth century as constituting the central inner core of scriptural revelation. Let us look at some illustrations of this.

1. *The Kingdom of God as the unifying theme of the Bible.* Swedenborg put on the back of the title-page in several volumes of his *Celestial Arcana* the great text "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness," as though this were the main key to his interpretation of Scripture. Several contemporary Biblical interpreters have followed this same clue. For example, John Bright's book, *The Kingdom of God* (1953), is based on the thesis that the "unifying theme" of the whole Bible is the gradual realization of God's Kingdom: the promise of it to the patriarchs and to Moses; the partial realization of it in the earthly kingdom of David; the sharp distinction between the unfaithful majority of Israel and the faithful Remnant in the period that led to the Exile; the reformulation of the hope of the Kingdom in Jeremiah and the Prophet of the Exile; the veiling of this vision in Ezra's holy Commonwealth; its realization in Jesus, the rejected but victorious Messiah, and in the Church, where a tension

between "Kingdom come" and "Kingdom coming" goes on to the end of the age. *All* of these historic stages in the realization of the Kingdom of God are shown to be relevant to the needs and problems of the modern Christian.

2. *"The Lord is the Word."* This proposition of Swedenborg's would be as acceptable to most contemporary Biblical interpreters as it would have been to Luther. Actually, it is closely connected with the first. If Christ is the mid-point in the history of God's Kingdom, then the coming of the Kingdom and the coming of Christ are to be seen in the same series of events. John Bright says in his preface, "To the mind of the New Testament faith not only all Scripture, but all history, centers in Christ." He warns, however, against forcing the meaning of Old Testament texts so as to find Christ in them prematurely. This is a danger to which men like Barth and Vischer are almost as much exposed today as were Luther and Swedenborg before the age of history. The more critical school of Biblical Theology would gladly grant Swedenborg's principle that Christ the Lord is Himself the unifying divine Word that runs through the Bible, but would be careful to distinguish between real anticipations of Christ in the Old Testament and artificial "reading-in."

3. *The "trio of themes"* running through Swedenborg's Bible interpretation would still be recognized as central themes by contemporary Bible interpreters. Modern interpreters would generally grant that the Bible is *The Book of God's Covenant People,* understandable only in the context of that People's history, faith, and community. If this is so, Bible history consists, in its most obvious meaning, of the history of the Covenant in its successive epochs, dispensations, or "churches"; which is what Swedenborg calls its "internal historical" sense. But since the early phases of the Covenant are preparatory, and the New Covenant in Christ is definitive, the meaning of the history of the Covenant is all recapitulated in the Life of Christ; and the life of the Christian is a humble but real recapitulation of the life of his Lord, into whose image he gradually grows as he becomes more united to Him through love and wisdom. What Swedenborg calls the "higher spiritual" sense and the "highest celestial" sense, referring as they do to the Christian life and the life of Christ, are thus organically and really bound up with the history of God's Covenant People, of which they are the final fruition, the secret of the ages at last disclosed, as the Epistle to the Ephesians proclaims so triumphantly.

In Oscar Cullman's *Christ and Time,* one of the most original studies

in Biblical Theology produced in this generation, the intimate relation between the three main themes of the Bible is portrayed in a graphic figure: two lines which converge to a point, and widen out again to infinity, after passing through that point. The Bible begins with all mankind as the sphere of God's purpose; then as mankind breaks successive covenants, the successive "dispensations" or "churches" narrow down to the faithful few — first Israel, then the Remnant of Israel, finally (in the moment when all the disciples fled) Christ alone as the solitary bearer of God's purpose. From that point on, the lines widen again, take in the new universally inclusive People of God founded on Christ, in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, and finally reach out to extend God's mercy to a redeemed mankind. This scheme of Cullman's has been criticized as over-simplified; but it makes very clear how the story of God's People in the Old Testament, the story of the Christ, and the story of each member of Christ's body, the Church, are facets of one continuous process of divine-human interaction in which God draws near to man in order that man's divine potentialities may be actualized.

Whether Swedenborg if living today would cling to his whole original scheme for decoding the Bible's deeper meanings, one may doubt; but one may be confident that he would not be upset by the findings of modern Bible interpreters. Modern historical understanding might even enable him to pass more directly and less intricately from the literal sense to the deeper senses. His main emphases would surely be confirmed rather than upset by modern Biblical Theology; so I now feel confident that he would support and participate in the Biblical Renewal of our age as he would support and participate in the Ecumenical Movement. Like all hypotheses about *what might happen under changed conditions,* this view of mine is subject to dispute, and I shall not be surprised or hurt if it is disputed by New Churchmen; but I assure you it is offered in all sincerity, as one more tribute to a great Christian leader I have learned to love and respect.

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